

Written evidence submitted by National Secular Society

Introduction

The National Secular Society is a not-for-profit, non-governmental civil society organisation founded in 1866, funded by its members and by donations. We advocate for separation of religion and state and promote secularism as the best means of creating a society in which people of all religions and none can live together fairly and cohesively. We seek a diverse society where all are free to practise their faith, change it, or to have no faith at all. We uphold the universality of individual human rights, which should never be overridden on the grounds of religion, tradition, or culture.

In accordance with the committee's strategic aim of improving culture and working practices in the House of Commons, we recommend that the Modernisation Committee undertake to end the practice of holding Anglican prayers as part of parliamentary business. This would represent a tangible example of the modernisation needed in Parliament, improve inclusivity, fairness, and freedom of conscience in our legislature, and ensure MPs and all those employed on the parliamentary estate feel fully welcome at their place of work.

This matter should be treated as a priority by the committee because the conduct and structures of the House of Commons transmit a powerful message about the values and principles we consider to be important in UK society. Practices embodying a privileged status for one particular religious tradition, thereby undermining proper regard for the right to freedom of religion or belief, undermine values of equality, fairness, and respect for human rights. Promoting these values is of crucial importance to the health of our democracy and aligns with the stated aims of the committee. Furthermore, the Speaker of the House of Commons and the Procedures Committee have both previously confirmed to us they have either no intention, or no power, to end the holding of parliamentary prayers. As such, and in the absence of any other clear mechanism by which parliamentary prayers could be abolished, we urge the Modernisation Committee to treat this matter as a priority.

Parliamentary prayers

Currently, sittings in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords begin with Anglican prayers. In the Commons, these are read by the Speaker's Chaplain - a member of the Anglican clergy.

When the Chamber is at its busiest, parliamentary prayers act as a bizarre and antiquated seat reservation system. Seats are reserved by obtaining a 'prayer card' and leaving it upon a seat, indicating a member's intention to acquire that seat by sitting there at prayers. By attending prayers, the seat is secured for the rest of the sitting. Even members who are slated to speak have no option but to attend prayers in order to reserve a seat. The system clearly disadvantages MPs who do not wish to attend Christian prayers.

Prayers are part of formal parliamentary business. Indeed, in the House of Lords, proceedings "cannot begin until prayers have been read". Similarly in the Commons, formal business "may" begin after prayers have been said¹.

Whilst they may be viewed by some as an important tradition, parliamentary prayers serve to assert the superiority of Christianity (and the Church of England in particular) at Westminster. This 'tradition' is inimical to a modern, pluralistic, secular democracy.

Inclusion and diversity

We believe parliamentary business should be conducted in a manner equally welcoming to all parliamentarians, whatever their personal religious beliefs. As it stands, the holding of Anglican prayers in the House of Commons excludes MPs who are of non-Christian faiths and those who are nonreligious. It calls into question whether the practices of the House are compatible with Article 9 of the Human Rights Act (Freedom of thought, belief and religion), or the Equality Act 2010, in which religion or belief is a protected characteristic.

This exclusion is multi-faceted, but one aspect is the function of prayers as a seat reservation system, which attaches a benefit to participation. As a result of this system, MPs who are not Christians must take part in a religious ritual of a faith they do not share in order to access the benefit of reserving a seat - an unacceptable imposition that disregards the right to freedom of religion or belief of members. It also directly affects the working life of MPs. In 2020, Crispin Blunt MP called for a review of parliamentary prayers after being effectively forced to attend in order to reserve a seat for prime minister's questions². Claims that attendance at prayers is optional, non-obligatory, or non-essential, disregard examples such as Blunt's, and do not take into account the clear disadvantage suffered by those who do not attend prayers.

Parliamentary prayers are also exclusionary in that they signal one particular religious tradition and organisation to be of greater importance than other religions and beliefs. By involving Christian liturgy and Anglican clerics in the formal business of the legislature, the privileged status of Christianity and the Church of England in our constitution and society is reasserted. This conveys to MPs and to the general public that Parliament is an essentially Christian institution, alienating those who hold other religious and nonreligious beliefs and giving the impression that they are of lower status in UK society.

The memorandum from the Chair states that the committee will work to ensure that the House of Commons is an organisation that "looks open and accessible to people from all walks of life" so it is "representative of the society which we serve". By definition, the inclusion of a religious ritual of a specific faith, presided over by a cleric of specific denomination, as part of the formal business of the legislature is incompatible with creating an organisation that is open and accessible to people from all walks of life. But it is particularly egregious in light of the increasing number of MPs who are not religious or belong to non-Christian religions.

As the memorandum to the committee correctly notes, this is the most diverse Parliament in history. At the swearing in of this Parliament, 46% of MPs either took a secular affirmation or swore on a non-Christian text³. Whilst some MPs with declared religious beliefs do choose to affirm rather than

¹ House of Commons Library – 'The relationship between church and state in the United Kingdom' – <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8886/CBP-8886.pdf>

² National Secular Society – Calls for parliamentary prayers review after MP compelled to attend – <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2020/01/calls-for-parliamentary-prayers-review-after-mp-compelled-to-attend>

³ National Secular Society – NSS urges Speaker to support end to parliamentary prayers – <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2024/07/nss-urges-speaker-to-support-end-to-parliamentary-prayers>

swear, the decision to affirm is strongly correlated with irreligiosity and/or a belief that religion and politics should be separate. In total, 259 MPs took the secular affirmation, a significant increase from 2019 when this figure was approximately 150.

The increasing irreligiosity and religious diversity of MPs mirrors that of the UK as a whole. Christians are now a minority in England and Wales at 46% of the population, a 13 percentage point decrease from 59% in 2011. Meanwhile, the percentage of people who have no religion has increased to 37%, compared with 25% in 2011⁴. Nonreligious people now make up the majority in Scotland at 51%. In 2011, this figure was 36%⁵. Members of minority religions including Islam and Hinduism are also increasing in England, Wales, and Scotland. Attendance at Church of England services has been in decline for many years, with less than 2% of the population now attending on a regular Sunday⁶.

There is no indication these trends of declining religiosity are set to stop or reverse. As such, the practice of parliamentary prayers is incompatible with the committee's stated aim of making the House of Commons an "attractive place of work for future generations" and one that is representative of society.

Parliamentarians who wish to pray are free to do so. But prayers should not form part of the official business of the UK legislature. The holding of prayers is the legacy of a society very different from the UK of today. In the interests of modernisation, and of promoting the values of equality, fairness, inclusivity, and respect for freedom of religion or belief, the committee should recommend ending the holding of prayers in the House of Commons.

Transparency and democratic process

The following is based on information provided to the NSS by the House of Commons Enquiry Service.

During prayers the Serjeant and the Chaplain are the only non-members present. All the other officers and staff do not enter the Chamber until after prayers; the public and press galleries are not open until the daily devotions of the House have been completed. Filming is also not permitted. These features of prayers are often justified on the basis of 'privacy'. Responding to a point of order seeking assurance that in no circumstances would prayers ever be televised, Speaker Weatherill confirmed in October 1989 that prayers have "always been and will remain private"⁷. There exists no written policy setting out the basis for conducting prayers in this way. In response to an enquiry from the National Secular Society, the House of Commons Enquiry Service found that in regards to "the origins of holding them [prayers] in private and the rationale for so doing, there exists, unfortunately, no definitive answer".

While prayers remain part of the official business of the House, 'privacy' is not a reasonable or relevant expectation. The insistence that prayers remain 'private' asserts that part of the functioning of the UK's democracy should be carried out in secret – the public is entirely excluded from this

⁴ National Secular Society – Census England & Wales: Less than half the population Christian –

<https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2022/11/census-england-and-wales-less-than-half-the-population-christian>

⁵ National Secular Society – Majority in Scotland have no religion, Census finds – <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2024/05/majority-in-scotland-have-no-religion-census-finds>

⁶ Church of England – Statistics for Mission 2023 – <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-12/statisticsformission2023.pdf>

⁷ House of Commons Enquiry Service – Summary of debate taken from a House of Commons Library paper [Chaplain to Mr Speaker, House of Commons Library Document No 19, 1994, pp49-50]

aspect of the House of Commons' function which, again, is part of its formal proceedings. The secretive character of parliamentary prayers, and the absence of any firm basis for the manner in which they are conducted, undermines the transparency, accountability, and reputation of the House of Commons. The committee should therefore recommend ending parliamentary prayers in the interest of driving up standards in Parliament.

MP support

Many parliamentarians have objected to the imposition of prayers on their daily business.

In 2019, an Early Day Motion to end parliamentary prayers attracted support from representatives of Conservatives, Labour, Lib Dems, SNP and the Green Party, as well as an independent MP⁸.

Other parliamentarians have expressed their opposition to parliamentary prayers since the 2024 general election, including Green MP Ellie Chowns. During a debate in July, Chowns described the use of prayers as a seat reservation system as "frankly rather ridiculous"⁹.

Examples from other parliaments

Westminster is the only parliament in the UK to impose exclusively Anglican prayers on its members. All devolved parliaments and assemblies have a more inclusive way to begin business than Westminster:

- The Scottish Parliament does not include prayers in its business. Instead, 'Time for Reflection' opens the weekly session where a speaker addresses the meeting for up to four minutes.
- The Northern Ireland Assembly begins formal business with a period of two minutes of silent prayer or contemplation.
- The Welsh Assembly has adopted no equivalent practice.

We recommend the House of Commons either adopt the model of the Welsh Senedd, or replace prayers with a private 'moment of reflection or contemplation' at the beginning of the day's business.

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⁸ EDM (Early Day Motion)1967: tabled on 11 January 2019 - <https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/52446/parliamentary-prayers>

⁹ Hansard, Code of Conduct and Modernisation Committee, Volume 752: debated on Thursday 25 July 2024 - <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-07-25/debates/7ED17C14-2C73-4EA7-B442-DE6E08BD66E3/CodeOfConductAndModernisationCommittee>